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IDENTIFICATION OF THE EARLIEST DEPICTION OF THE BOCCA DELLA VERITA ON COIN NO 345 OF THE EH

I. Introduction

The discovery, which is described in this paper, was spontaneous and without prior research intent. While looking at the reverse of the denarius of King Wenceslas of Hungary - reigned 1301-1305 - ÉH no. 345 ¹ I was reminded of the similarity between it and the iconic stone carving, the Bocca Della Verita in Rome. Once I started to research whether there could be a basis for this similarity, the threads led further and further away from Wenceslas' denarius and closer and closer to the story of the Bocca Della Verita.

II. Research history

¹ Dr. Emil Unger: Hungarian coinage, volume I



N° 345

1. The catalogues give the following succinct descriptions of the medals under study: according to Réthy, "*Human face, framed by leaves.*"² Opitz has a similar view: "*a face surrounded by foliage.*"³ In my paper I want to put these descriptions in a different perspective by looking at the origin of the medal image.
2. Most of the coins minted during Wenceslas's short reign between 1301 and 1305 feature unusual and interesting creatures, fantasy animals, on the reverse. It is likely that the strange stories popular in the 12th and 14th centuries, and even stranger monsters collected in

² Dr. László Réthy, CNH -1899 p. 40.

³ Csaba Tóth, Géza József Kiss: Opitz III. p. 243.

bestiaries,⁴ influenced the design of the coin designs. I assume that the coin designers had some kind of "auxiliary material" from which they drew inspiration, or even copied motifs outright. The coin of No 345 stands out even among denarii of unusual creatures, because it depicts only a detailed human face. What can be said immediately is that the face cannot be that of the king, because the nature of the face and the lack of a crown rule it out. The difference between the face of the coin of the EH 345 and the face of the coin of the EH 346 depicting the crowned head of Wenceslas makes this fact clear (*see image 1*), as does the fact that, as on the other coins of Wenceslas, the monarch is depicted on the obverse. But then who could be on it, and why is the face framed in a circular frame? Since other coins of Wenceslas also feature strange, mysterious, typically medieval creatures, one might suspect something similar. How could the face be familiar? The foyer of the church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome. The large circular marble relief of the Bocca Della Verita is one of the best known - and commercialised - works of art in the world. It is best known for the legend that it bites off the hand of the person who puts it in his mouth and lies about it. It was to verify this similarity that my research began.



N° 346

EH 345

Picture 1.

III. Process of identification of the coin image No. ÉH-345 - *Image 2*

I will refrain from analysing the obverse depicting the royal figure because it does not provide any relevant information for my question. In an unusual way, I would like to present and prove my claim in the title by taking the process of discovery in chronological order. The reason for this is that it makes it easier and easier to follow the logical connections, but I hope that this perspective does not detract from the scientific value of the paper.

⁴ J L. Schrader: A Medieval Bestiary Metropolitan Museum of Art 1986 Summer

1. First, let's compare the faces on the coin images of Bocca Della Verita and the coin image of the N° 345. The similarity seems convincing. The large eyes, the shape of the nose, the open mouth and their proportion to each other are very similar. (See image 2) The main differences are the canopy framing the face and the large raven hair and beard. In addition, on some of the coins of Wenceslas the mouth appears to be smiling, but since this is not the case on most mint varieties, it can be ignored.



Picture 2.

2. Research into the origins of the Bocca Della Verita revealed that the marble work dates back to the Roman period, the 1st or 2nd century, and depicts Oceanos⁵, the god of the sea and water. Given its original Roman function, it was probably a water drain, and it absorbed water through holes in the water⁶ This is notable because it is closely associated with water, and I believe that the motifs identified as canopy may resemble waves washing around a head that is projecting upwards from the water. With this in mind, I began to look for examples of Roman imagery of Oceanos.
3. The horns of crab feathers and the shaggy big hair and beard are constant elements in his depiction of Oceanos. In addition, it is common to depict Oceanos as having waves crashing on or flowing off his face. Although this seems to confirm the preliminary assumption that Oceanos is also depicted on the coin of No 345, there is no evidence

⁵ Since the example is from the Roman period, I will use the Latin form of the name Okeanos.

⁶ Fabio Barry: Art Bulletin 2011 March: The 'Mouth of Truth' and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian

to suggest that Oceanos on the Bocca Della Verita was the model for Wenceslas' coin, since the Roman stone carving does not show any wave patterns on the face.



Picture 3.

It is possible that another Roman mask or mosaic depicting Oceanos is based on Wenceslas' denarius, but in my research I have not found any depiction of Oceanos that so clearly resembles the coin image as the Bocca Della Verita. And while there were certainly other depictions known as early as the 1200s, we know of none that have been recorded or had any fame at the time - especially international fame. The

other observation that supports the idea that Wenceslas' coin is not just one of many depictions of Oceanos, but is associated with the Bocca Della Verita, is that, when the coin is properly held, the mouth of the face has pointed teeth (*see image 4*). Only the Bocca Della Verita is associated with the legend of the biting off of the hand, and other Oceanic representations do not even show pointed teeth, and the pointed teeth certainly refer to the associated legend of the biting off of the hand.



Picture 4.

4. Since the legend, which dates back to the Middle Ages, seems to have no connection with Oceanus' original role in Roman times, it may be helpful to examine the origins of this myth of the "*Mouth of Truth*", which still exists today.

It was first mentioned in an 11th century guidebook as the temple of Faun, where an image had deceived Juliano.⁷ The story to which the guidebook refers is better known from a 12th century German text, in which Emperor Julian puts his hand in the mouth of a stone, which is seized by the devil behind the stone because the emperor has deceived a woman.⁸

The first record of the stone being supported against the wall of Santa Maria in Cosmedin dates from 1450, as shown in a drawing from 1593.⁹ (*image 5*)

In his monograph, Barry mentions that the Bocca Della Verita may have been nearby at least since the church was restored around 1120, as it may have inspired one of the frescoes in the church. So, although the exact location of the stone in the 12th century is not known, the carving itself and the legend attached to it may have been widely known at that time.

⁷ MIRABILIA URBIS ROMAE No 11 <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/mirabilia.html>

"Ad sanctam Mariam in Fontana, templum Fauni; quod simulacrum locutum est Iuliano et deceptum."

⁸ MuseiItaly: <https://www.museionline.info/musei/bocca-della-verita>

⁹ Fabio Barry: Art Bulletin 2011 March: The 'Mouth of Truth' and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian



Picture 5.

5. On the basis of the previous points, it can be assumed that the coin of the EH 345 is based on a Bocca Della Verita depiction of the 13th century at the latest, and it also seems logical that the circular pattern on the coin may be derived from the waves on the face known from the Oceanos depictions. So why are these patterns not there on the Roman relief? My theory is that by the 13th century at the latest the pattern must have been there. The answer to this question can only be the erosion of the 700-800 years since then, and the fact that the Bocca Della Verita has been a tourist attraction over the centuries, and has been engraved with an astonishing amount of graffiti by thousands or perhaps tens of thousands of travellers since the Middle Ages.



Picture 6.

However, if we carefully study the photos at the highest possible resolution, we can identify the trace of a very similar shape on the Bocca Della Verita, exactly there and exactly as predicted by the Wenceslas denarius pattern - see Fig. 7, arrow 1.



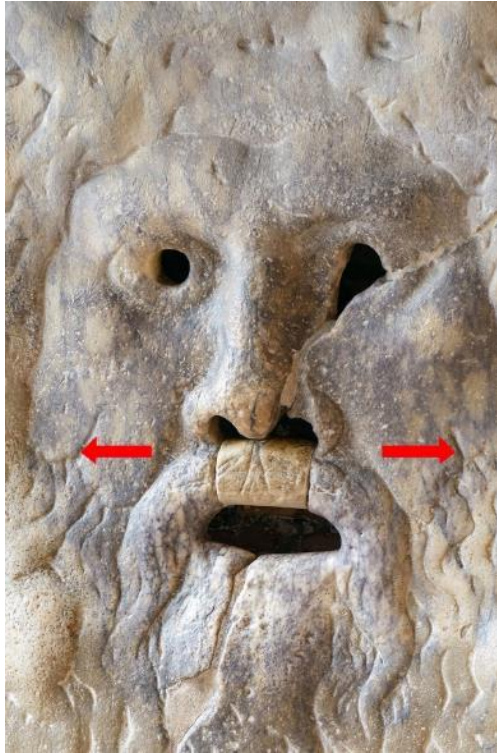
Picture 7.

The silhouette of the pattern on the forehead is difficult but clear to see. Since it fits exactly to the centre line of the head and the pattern is regular and symmetrical, chance can be excluded. At the lowest tip of the wave on the forehead (*red arrow in image 8*), a small zigzag relief appears to have survived intact in the photograph, perhaps making the original work look like the upper left of image 3.



Picture 8.

The faces also show a deep symmetrical trace (*arrows in image 9*). On the left face, a continuation of this trace is visible, which also resembles a three-arched pattern known from the Wenceslas denarius (*image 10*.) This can be seen even more clearly in a 3d model (*Fig. 11*). On the right side of the face, the same part is more worn, but since the lower parts of the arc are axially symmetrical - and the whole relief itself is - it is likely that the pattern would have been nearly symmetrical.



Picture 9.



Picture 10.



Picture 11.

There is also a small regular triangle at the midline of the mouth, which, based on other Oceanic representations, may also have been part of a wave associated with the mouth (*Fig. 12*). The original wave motifs can be reconstructed on the basis of Wenceslas's coin image, Roman Oceanos depictions and traces of the Bocca Della Verita patterns. If we also use Barry's study to depict the crab horns and the bearded dolphins¹⁰, we can get a fairly accurate picture of what the Bocca Della Verita originally looked like in Roman times (*Fig. 13*).

¹⁰ Fabio Barry: Art Bulletin 2011 March: The 'Mouth of Truth' and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian



Picture 12.



Picture 13.

6. Although we have been able to identify the origin of the coin image of 345 AD, it is important to note that in the Middle Ages the stone carving was no longer identified with Oceanos, so that the wave patterns could indeed be interpreted as plant patterns. The Greenman was popular at the time, and there are many uncertain theories about

its origin. It is very complex and varied in appearance, but is most commonly found on wood and stone carvings in medieval Western European churches.¹¹ Without even intending to unravel the origins of the 'green man', my hypothesis is that the depiction of the Bocca Della Verita also had a strong influence on certain stages of the organic development of the Greenman. I illustrate this with a 14th and a 15th century book illustration (Fig. 14).



Picture 14.

¹¹ Stephen Miller: *The Green Man in Medieval England: Christian Shoots from Pagan Roots* 2022 Cambridge Scholars Publishing p.5.

The face in the upper image clearly resembles the Roman relief, but the waves that lap up the face are replaced by green leaves. At the same time, the depictions of sea creatures, such as the dolphin, have been preserved. In the lower picture, too, the resemblance of the face to the Roman face is eerie, with the leaves also overlapping the face, but the leaf patterns here are of a different shape from those on the Bocca Della Verita or those on Wenceslas' denarius. Obviously it is impossible to work out how many transfers, good or bad copies, deliberate or accidental alterations, or changes, a drawing originally made from the Bocca Della Verita has undergone over the centuries to reach a particular book illustration, but these similarities illustrate the complex evolution of the representational methods. At the same time, the character of the face, the gaping mouth and the leaves that blend into the face make it clear that the Bocca Della Verita may have been the original source of the illustration. It is likely that there were many such graphic sources, given that, as a tourist attraction, the relief may have been drawn by many people as early as the Middle Ages.

What seems clear is that the medieval illustrators who saw the Bocca Della Verita in person on the spot also regarded the wave patterns, which were certainly in better condition at the time, as leaf patterns. Also notable in the lower image is that the head is drawn to the body of a dragon, fitting for a fearsome legend, but not fitting for the Greenman. If we compare even these two images with the one on Wenceslas' denarius, it is immediately clear how much more authentic the image of the 345th coin of the N.H. is, and therefore the illustration on which the denarius design is based must have been based on a slightly distorted source with little translation. This is supported not only by the similarity of the face, but also by the patterns of the leaves and the way they fit the face.

Greenman's illustrations show a more distant visual affinity with Bocca Della Verita than the illustrations in image 14. Either in time, or in the likeness of the face, or in the pattern of the leaves (waves), they are further removed from the Bocca Della Verita than the coin image of Wenceslas's denarius, and it can therefore be stated that the coin image of No 345 is the earliest, most accurate representation of the Bocca Della Verita known at present.

7. I am convinced that the Greenman is not the only motif influenced by the Bocca Della Verita. From the 14th century onwards, marble reliefs of the Bocca di Leone, or 'The Lion's Mouth', began to appear in Venice, where Venetian citizens fighting for justice could insert their complaints through the open mouth.¹² Although they were supposed to depict lions because of the lion, the symbol of Venice, it is not difficult to recognise the features of the Bocca Della Verita.

¹² Kasa Dietz: National Geographic 2020. 12.31. Need to complain? Here's how Renaissance-era Venetians did it



Photo 17.

The Bocca Della Veritat's terrifying, mystical expression, legend and transnational fame thus enabled it to capture the imagination of the monster-loving medieval man, and over the centuries to spread its influence to other representations with different meanings.

Finally, it needs to be explained why, while on Wenceslas' denarius the leaf motifs run around the face, on the Roman carving the wave "hits" the face only in a few places. There are several possible reasons for this difference. On the one hand, whoever drew the Bocca Della Verita in life in the 12th or 13th century would have used the visible wave patterns - e.g. on the forehead - as a basis for adding details that were already more than a thousand years old and therefore worn. On the other hand, the makers of the books, who illustrated the books on the basis of the original drawing, added to the patterns for aesthetic reasons. This is also the case with the lower picture 14, only here, after who knows how many copies, the shape and position of the leaf has changed. Thirdly, the coin's designer may have added to the original drawing or book illustration, interpreting the incomplete design as a wreath of plants. He retained the wave pattern of three circular arches, but unified the smaller and larger arches to form a regular coin design. Of course, several of these could be true at the same time, but I think the third case is the most likely, because on Wenceslas's coin the wreath of leaves runs around in a circle, connected by a small arc, which gives a unified, aesthetic coin image.

III. Summary

On the reverse of Wenceslas's coin of 345 A.D., as on the theme of the king's earlier coins, there is a surprisingly faithful depiction of an interesting contemporary legend. As this is the earliest ever copy of the Bocca Della Verita to be reproduced with such accuracy, dating from the 13th century at the latest, the discovery has also helped to observe the artefact in its less worn state, 7-800 years ago, and thus to obtain a more accurate - even reconstructible - picture of its original Roman appearance.